



## Some thoughts on the role of institutional management and leadership in times of transition

**prof. dr. Ada Pellert**

*Rector magnificus, Fernuniversität Hagen*



Appropriate forms of management and leadership for educational institutions are a subject of heated debates throughout the entire European higher education area. Increasingly, the area of management competence is being recognised as the bottleneck for institutional autonomy, and for the emergence of the university as an organisation fit for operation. Educational institutions are extremely reluctant to recognise and reward success in management and leadership duties. Professional reputation is achieved first and foremost through accomplishments within the academic discipline. Unless performance in the areas of management and leadership is continuously incorporated in career-relevant performance evaluation, the professionalisation of management will remain a pipe dream.

Above all, institutional management must be prepared to deal with ambivalence, ambiguity, complexity and contradictory tensions, and to understand that these paradoxes can even create positive effects. Many of the organisational difficulties, as well as the organisation's intellectual appeal, arise from its contradictory objectives. Higher education institutions are generally distanced from society (autonomy) yet relevant to society; they are society's critical conscience, whilst remaining the guardians of tradition. Universities have to experiment whilst remaining efficient; they support expertocracy, but are also committed to formal majority-rule democracy. The fundamentally emancipatory function of (higher) education institutions, the individualistic knowledge production as well as the participative decision-making within the faculty, therefore runs counter to traditional management ideals.

It is not only the organisation as a whole that must be flexible enough to withstand these tensions. The institutional management also has to cultivate a necessary degree of 'frustration tolerance' since the contradictory and ambiguous situation renders it nearly impossible to declare any act of leadership a success. An academic's career is affected very little by his/her capability to develop the organisation. Instead, professional reputation is achieved through research and further development of academic expertise. In contrast, there is usually no reward for good performance in terms of the organisation, management, or coordination.

Unlike commercial organisations, the university receives no direct feedback from the market. Ensuring that external perspectives are sufficiently considered during internal communication, service production, and quality assurance in order to create a meaningful balance between internal and external dimensions, self- and external monitoring is of essential importance. Responsibilities need to be defined and compliance with quality standards has to be assessed. The institutional leadership will

have to apply itself to this conflict area if it wishes to remain credible. Institutional leadership must also ensure that the quality and evaluation standards are reasonably transparent. To the extent possible, the organisation should send unequivocal signals to the members of the organisation about what the central performance areas are depending on the members' various functions.

The structures, processes and cultures of the organisational units are among the most important starting points for the institutional leadership. It is particularly important to formulate information-, communication- and decision-making structures at the level of the decentralised organisational units. In addition to these structures, it is also essential to review the processes, i.e. changes in communication relations, dynamics of decision-making, and management style. In order to initiate change, one must first ascertain the direction in which the existing organisational culture is taking its members. Real change requires at least a gradual shift in organisational culture, i.e. in the opinions, feelings and attitudes members of the organisation harbour about their work (Mintzberg 1983).

Thus, structures, processes and culture are three distinct but equally important 'areas of intervention' for university management (Pellert 1995). Financial resources, personnel management, and information are among the most essential instruments at the institutional leadership's disposal for initiating reform.

**Structures:** Institutional leadership must concern itself with the division of labour into specialised roles, functions and units, and with the development of units and functions which coordinate and integrate the specialised elements once again. The quality of the leadership depends on the 'concentration of administrative competence'. Universities often lack the fundamental information necessary for planning, governing and monitoring. The information system must be transformed from an instrument for the execution of laws and regulations into an instrument for target-oriented steering of performance-generating processes.

**Processes:** Institutional leadership performs an important function by creating opportunities for the discussion of goals and debates on quality standards. As a result, the creation of forums where a collective understanding of the problems can be developed is imperative, in particular since the same event can be interpreted very differently by different people. Such opportunities for discussion and debate must be organised with a view to providing space for various interpretations and collective argumentation. Shared opinions are formed mainly through collective experiences. The more successful one is at creating opportunities for collective experiences, the greater the probability that the similar interpretations which are so essential to organisational cohesion will actually emerge. Consequently, it is important for the institutional leadership to encourage and arrange opportunities for formal as well as informal communication within the organisation. Personnel guidance in particular is at the core of personnel management. Performance review has become an important tool for communication and guidance. Quality-conscious universities must take the issue of personnel assessment especially seriously, since most surveys show a majority of members of higher education institutions, both academic and administrative staff, complaining of lack of feedback within the university system.

**Culture:** In loosely integrated, normative systems such as higher education institutions, institutional leadership should particularly emphasise symbolic management and try to express core values clearly (Weick 1976). Rituals provide the institution with the opportunity to express the values it considers important.

The organisational vision should not be perceived as the vision only of the institutional leadership but has to align with the ideas of others. The vision should emerge as the result of listening to others and showing respect for their views rather than an expression of the leadership's goals. The emphasis should be less on doing things differently than on doing them better. Goals should be selected from the range of what is possible and special attention should be paid to these objectives as priorities. Meanwhile, the new emphasis must be consistent and integrated with the core values and traditions of the institution. In order to become a shared vision, it needs to succeed in connecting the institution's past with its core values for the future.

Managers are no 'heroic leaders' in this sense either, but rather catalysts of existing processes. They channel activities in subtle ways. Influencing the cultural norms and the rhetoric of an organisation to the extent possible and strengthening existing cultures are also important factors for success.

Institutional leadership should also advocate something like 'academic self-esteem' at institutes/ departments/higher education institutions and stimulate processes of interpretation and social integration. If outdated myths prevent assimilation and learning, then leaders who take the time to understand symbolic forms and activities can develop creative alternatives for their organisations to address current demands. In terms of introducing reform processes and permanent change, institutional managers can shape organisational culture through their experiences, their comments, and the manner in which they deal with conflicts and create roles. Institutional leaders are increasingly the motivating and creative forces behind the process of change – 'agents of change'.

Management must demonstrate its own initiative and be proactive. But it is necessary to make an effort at gaining the academic staff's approval, to ask colleagues, seek out their advice, allow them time to make decisions and give clear signals that even after a consensus has been reached, the issue can still be re-opened for debate. At the same time, a leadership without ideas and authority would not be credible – there has to be a balance between top-down and bottom-up.

*These ideas have been further elaborated in Pellert, Ada: Academic leadership and organizational culture, in: Handbook on Leadership and Governance in Higher Education. Handbook for Decision-makers and Administrators, Berlin and Stuttgart 2010: Raabe Verlag.*